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Οὐχ οἱ πολλὰ, ἀλλ' οἱ χρήσιμα
ἀναγινώσκοντες, εἰσὶ σπουδαῖοι.

ARISTIP. apud DIOG. LAERT.

Not they who read much, but they
who read the best books, improve
the most.

THERE is a set of men belonging to the literary community, whose heads are filled with every kind of knowledge, who have perused almost every book on every subject, but who are unable to apply their information, and are ignorant how to communicate it to their fellow-men. These men are admirable sources

of intelligence; knowledge may be drawn from them, which is of essential service to the enquirer: but the misfortune is, that they are too often fond of edifying the public with their own speculations, of shewing to the world their extensive knowledge, and of letting mankind see that they are not amongst the ignorant multitude of those, who pass through a whole life without giving birth to a single book. We are consequently presented with a variety of collections of crude & undigested materials, of facts jumbled together without order or connection, of ridiculous theories, & absurd deductions from the facts which are adduced; together with a strange mixture of the thoughts & expressions of other writers, which, as they are constantly floating in the head

ered brains of these scavengers of literature, unavoidably flow out in a muddy stream.

When we think of such men as those we have been speaking of, we are even prone to attach to their characters the idea of shallowness of intellect, and barrenness of thought. It is true that the greater portion of these learned men are of such a character; the wing of genius can surmount the fetters and obstacles which impede proper minds; but it too often happens, that men of genius themselves read too much, and think too little; read every thing they see without making a judicious selection, and with little discrimination, and therefore, when they come to stand forth in their own character, their works contain but little originality, their own ideas are too much mingled with those of others,

their speculations are devoid of clearness & of perspicuity, and possess a certain barrenness of invention, which is altogether unworthy of their powers of mind, and their rate of talent.

Men of genius are apt to run into one of these extremes; either to read too little, in consequence of relying too much upon their own powers; or to read too much, in that ardor and ambition for knowledge, which is ever the characteristic of genius, where self-sufficiency and self-conceit have not already poisoned the springs of mental exertion. In the former case, the mind, unfed & unsupported, soon exhausts its own resources; the tree, denied the ~~fertile dew~~ fertilising stream, droops & withers away; and in like manner the mind, when left to its own exertions for support, soon feels those exertions

futile, sinks to the level of common powers, and displays those faculties which nature gave only by a few faint flashes, more like the fitful gleams of an expiring lamp, than like the steady blaze which shines with unintermitted lustre. It is perhaps common, or at least very prevalent among young men of genius, to place too implicit a reliance on their own exertions; to think too lightly of their contemporaries; to attach more importance to the unassisted flights of their own minds than to the aid of knowledge, & the acquirements of solid reading. They are fonder of giving vent to the sparkling effusions of their genius, than of laying in a stock of knowledge which will enable them in after years to make more vigorous, more successful, more lasting exertions. We always see therefore, that when the first

flash has past away, there is neither beauty, nor originality, nor depth of thought in any thing they produce. They have no materials upon which to work; they have frittered away their minds, or burnt out their fire in a few successful moments, and have left nothing but a wreck of what they once possest. Such men, however bright may be their career, however promising their endeavors, in the commencement of their literary course, are soon compelled to abandon their undertaking, or to adopt one of these two alternatives, either to proceed without applause, and write in total neglect of the world, or to set themselves down to the acquisition of that knowledge they had hitherto despised.

On the other hand, it is pitiable to observe how men of genius often cramp & fetter themselves

by a load of miscellaneous learning, acquired without proper discrimination. Their powers of mind are choked & clogged up by the lumber with which they are enveloped. Their memory is crowded with an assemblage of ideas; so that their works present but a motley patchwork to the eye of their readers. It is not in this way that the greatest models of human genius have conducted themselves. With learning fully equal to that of the unfortunate men we have considered, if not superior, they have with a suitable discrimination confined themselves to those parts of knowledge alone which they could grasp without impeding the progress of their mind; have laid hold of a few grand points of human acquirement, & made themselves masters of them. The consequence has been, that their

ideas and views have been clear, with no heterogeneous mixture, no misconceptions of things and thoughts. They have applied the whole force of their minds to the improvement of what they have selected; they have labored with patient research not in the investigation of all things, but of a few; and they have therefore risen bright from their labors, with the lustre of their genius burning with more resplendent ray, because joined with deep knowledge & accurate discrimination. They throw new light on every thing they have handled; they pour the full tide of their capacious minds upon the dark recesses of human knowledge; they bring all things to open day, they make clear what was obscure, they purify & they embellish what was before devoid of beauty & ornament.

Such are the natural effects of a judicious selection in reading. The result of a contrary course we have already marked; and there is in addition to what has been mentioned a certain unconquerable desire manifest to display all the stores of knowledge; to dilate & to dilute a subject till it is feebleness itself; to dwell upon its different bearings, to tipple on the various facts connected with it, instead of bringing it into one grand focus, & condensing its details in a connected view; - which rather tends to excite our disgust, than to either to raise our curiosity, or promote our investigation.

Thus far we have been only considering this fault, in connection with men of great genius, & extensive reach of mind.

But all men are not of this stamp. The gift of genius is confined to a few. The large majority of mankind are narrow in their views, & limited in their conceptions of things; they cannot grasp the whole of a subject at once, nor trace it to all its bearings & relations. They stand rather on the threshold of knowledge, than penetrate its depths. They therefore require direction in a greater degree than do men of genius. They have ~~too~~ fewer means of extricating themselves from the difficulties in which they may be involved; and are consequently much sooner lost & bewildered; more clouded amid the host of thoughts and facts which rush upon their minds.

Many men are there, who with moderate powers of mind, possess

notwithstanding, that insatiable thirst for information, which, if properly directed, might raise them to a respectable standing in the ranks of literature, & ensure them the applause and esteem of the world. But of the vast quantity of authors who are perpetually entering the lists, how many are there, who with these same moderate powers, have adventured themselves on a literary career; many with scarcely any knowledge at all, and many with so much learned lumber in their heads, that they are unable to know how to dispose of it.

This dangerous propensity should be checked in early youth. Did our schools & colleges take cognizance of this growing fault, it might in a great measure

be done away. But the misfortune to be lamented is, that youths are left to follow their own inclinations; their knowledge therefore is either scanty, and loosely acquired, or it is gained with little regard to order and propriety of arrangement. They are either discouraged and frightened from the undertaking, or they plunge into it with that blind ardor which distinguishes nothing, and which inevitably leads them into confusion and disorder. To the inexperienced eye of youthful ambition, the shades of all that have been venerable for their extensive learning, & renowned for their unbounded acquirements, pass in ~~review~~ appalling grandeur. The fire of emulation kindling at the contemplation hurries the

mind forward; the impulse is obeyed, & it very rarely happens that a proper direction is taken. It seems at that period as if the acquisition of every thing was desirable. The young man, following his own guidance, launches forth without exactly knowing whither he intends to steer; the wide world of human knowledge is before him, and with the ardor of some adventurous mariner, who wishes to trace every sea, & circle every shore, he seeks to touch at every point of investigation; while, if he for a moment paused to reflect, he would foresee, that he could but at best pluck the flowers that grow along the banks, instead of being enabled to penetrate into some clime

congenial to his disposition & his talents, & to cull there those fruits whose richness would add delight & vigor to his soul.

The aged mariner in these dangerous seas, might inform us, that such a course is extremely perilous; that we are in continual danger of being caught either in the calms of stupid bewilderment, or in the turbulent whirlpools of unsteadiness & irresolution; of running on the shoals of doubt & uncertainty, or the rocks of total confusion & dismay; of sailing from deep to deep in a vain search for a resting place, or of being allured by some detached part, whose beauty only conceals its uselessness & its deformity.

To drop the metaphor; improvement is not the offspring

of an unbounded range, any more than of a cursory survey of literature; and the man who builds his hopes of immortal fame upon either of these foundations, will in the end find himself miserably deceived. We may load our minds with knowledge, we had almost said, to infinity; there is no saying how much the human mind will hold. But when we have attained all, we could, at the close of life, when the past comes in stern & solemn review before us, we will then have the mortification to reflect, that we have lived for ourselves alone; that none has ever been benefited or instructed by all our labors; that we have

wasted our time in unnecessary acquisitions, forgetting our duty to ourselves & to mankind; & that we are carrying down to the grave with us, to be lost forever, what, had we properly attained it, might have been of essential service to our fellow-beings.

E.